The Nicolet Myth

By Harry Dever

ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS ERRORS in Great Lakes historiography is the alleged route taken by Jean Nicolet during his famous voyage. All authorities now agree that in 1634 Nicolet discovered Lake Michigan, Green Bay, and Wisconsin. However, it can be shown conclusively that he actually went up the eastern shore of Lake Superior, probably to the mouth of the Montreal River in Algoma County, Ontario. There is no evidence whatsoever that Nicolet or any European of his time knew of the existence of Lake Michigan.

The propounder of the Nicolet myth was John Gilmary Shea, who used as his source the *Jesuit Relations.* Later writers have overestimated the carefulness of Shea's analysis, and have paid too much attention to Shea and his followers and not enough to the *Relations.*[1]

One can easily see how Shea was misled. There are four points in the *Relations* that seem to substantiate his theory:

First. The name of the tribe that Nicolet went to visit was the Ouinipigou. Shea plausibly concluded that this tribe was the Wisconsin Winnebago.

Second. According to the *Relations,* all the tribes between Huronia and Nicolet's destination spoke Algonquian except the Ouinipigou. This seemed to indicate that the Ouinipigou were Winnebago, for the Winnebago spoke a Siouan dialect, not Algonquian.

[1]Only the *Jesuit Relations* contains what can be considered primary source material on Jean Nicolet's voyage. Father Barthélemy Vimont gives the only specific motivations for the voyage, but his account is vague; Father Paul Le Jeune gives a sound summary of the tribes in the Upper Lakes area, which he said was supplied by Nicolet. For Vimont, see Reuben Gold Thwaites (ed.), *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (73 vols.; Cleveland: Burrows Bros., 1896-1901), XXIII, 277-79. For Le Jeune, see *Jesuit Relations,* XVIII, 231-33. Shea's erroneous theory that Nicolet visited Wisconsin first appeared in *Discovery and Exploration of the Mississippi Valley* (New York: Clinton Hall, 1852), pp. xx-xxii.

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Third. The Ouinipigou were said to be three hundred leagues *west* of Huronia. This could reasonably be Green Bay.

Fourth. Nicolet named tribes near the Ouinipigou that were found a little over a third of a century later in the neighborhood of Green Bay.

This, then, formed Shea's case. Nevertheless, there are three points that refute it, and neither Shea nor any of his successors has given them the attention they deserve.

First. Father Vimont indicated that the Ouinipigou gave Nicolet a nickname, *Manitou Iriniou,* "Wonderful Man," which is Algonquian, not Siouan. Shea's theory appeared three years before the publication of *Hiawatha,* after which everyone learned a little tortured Chippewa. It isn't likely that Shea, who was not an Algonquian scholar, knew that *manitou* was an Algonquian word. So Shea may not have known, but most of his more modern successors must have known, that *manitou* is Algonquian. Yet, they naively repeated the impossible tale that this was in the name bestowed on Nicolet by a Siouan tribe.

Second. Father Le Jeune's *Relation* plainly shows that Nicolet found the Ouinipigou up the eastern shore of Lake Superior. After naming the many tribes Nicolet found north of Huronia, at the foot of Georgian Bay, and near the Sault, Father Le Jeune continued:

> Beyond this rapid we find the little lake [Whitefish Bay], upon the shores of which, to the North, are the Roquai. To the North of these are the Mantoue. . . . Passing this smaller lake, we enter the second fresh-water sea [Lake Superior], upon the shores of which are the Maroumine; and still farther, upon the same banks, dwell the Ouinipigou. . . ." [my brackets]

How could anyone reasonably interpret that as a voyage across the northern part of Lake Huron, through the Straits of Mackinac, and across Lake Michigan and Green Bay? There is no question that Nicolet went as far as the Sault. "Beyond this rapid" (Sault) can only refer to the Lake Superior direction.

Third. Father Le Jeune's *Relation* states that Nicolet said that if he had continued his journey up a big river for three days he would have reached the sea. Now this obviously doesn't apply

to the Fox River in Wisconsin, nor does it seem to apply to the Montreal in Ontario. The explanation is that the French of that time, not nearly so familiar with the native languages as historians would have us believe, misunderstood the meaning of *Ouinipigou.* They thought it meant "salt water," hence, "the sea," whereas the term actually meant "nasty water." Sometimes, it is true, Algonquians called the sea "nasty water," but they also called some other places by this name, such as Green Bay, Lake Winnepeg, and Wenebegon Lake, (Sudbury County, Ontario). The last might reasonably be reached after three days' journey up the Montreal by portage to the Cow River. One map of Nicolet's time shows a small *Lac des Puants* up a river east of the Sault, which must be the the Mississagi and its continuation, the Wenebegon River.[2]

Why, then, did Nicolet say the Ouinipigou did not speak Algonquin and then quote a nickname they gave him that was definitely Algonquin? In Nicolet's time Algonquin did not refer to the large family of languages that are today included in the term *Algonquian.* At that time the French used it only for the language now called Ojibwa (Chippewa), as contrasted with the Cree dialect which they called Montagnais. Therefore, Nicolet's Ouinipigou spoke Cree, not what he called Algonquin, though that is its present classification.[3]

Furthermore, Nicolet mentioned no difficulty in communicating with the Ouinipigou, and he correctly translated the nickname they gave him. No Frenchman at that time had reported any contact with Siouan speakers. Moreover, the nickname showed that their language differed slightly from the Ojibwa. The Ojibwa would have called him *Manitou Inini,* not *Manitou Ininiou,* which is probably the correct version of the Ouinipigou nickname. Of course, Winnebago is not the Wisconsin Winnebago's name for their tribe (It was Hochenagra, Otcharga, etc.). The Winnebagos were evidently called "nasty waters" by the Algonquians because they lived on Green Bay. Father Marquette was also misled by the meaning of Ouinipigou

[2]*Puant* is French for "stinking," or "foul-smelling."

[3]This confusion, and its gradual clarification, can be seen in Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations,* XLIV, 239; VI, 165; VIII, 249; IX, 193; XX, 41; XXI, 123-25; XLI, 185.

because he looked all over Green Bay for salt springs, and found none, but he said he found plenty of nasty water.

Father Vimont also mentions that Nicolet concluded a major peace agreement with the Ouinipigou. He probably did. But he certainly could not conclude a major agreement with a tribe whose language he could not understand (Winnebago, i.e., Siouan). Yet, he would have had no trouble communicating with the Algonquian Ouinipigou.

Why were the Ouinipigou said to be three hundred leagues *west* of Huronia, rather than northwest as they actually were? Looking at a modern map, one would find it hard to understand. However, seventeenth century maps showed Lake Huron running east and west, with Huronia at the eastern end and the Sault at the western end.[4] Lake Superior was shown directly west of the Sault. The Straits of Mackinac and Lake Michigan were not shown, because they were not known at that time.

We must now consider some of the tribes mentioned by Nicolet that were found around Green Bay a little over a third of a century later. It was then said that this was the territory of the Winnebagos, and that the others were interlopers. One tribe Shea and his successors thought they identified was the Illinois. The Ouinipigou reported in their neighborhood a tribe they described *but did not name* as *nadouesiu assinipour eriniouai,* that is, "foreign-speaking stone-using men," or, "primitive foreigners." It has been universally accepted that this refers to three tribes, who later became known as the Sioux, Assiniboine, and Illinois; this is not so, as the Ouinipigou only intended some Siouan-speaking tribe. Someone capitalized the three words of this description; someone inserted commas and articles. This last is certain as there are no articles in Algonquian.

On this shaky base has been created a story that Nicolet actually visited the Illinois. There never could have been a tribe the other Algonquians called "Illinois," which is only a garbled

[4]See, for example, Champlain's map of 1632, in Louis G. Karpinski, *Bibliography of the Printed Maps of Michigan* (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1933), Plate I. Jean Boisseau's map of New France (1643), published nine years after Nicolet's journey, also shows the erroneous east-west pattern of Lake Huron (*Mer Douce*); in Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations,* XXIII, 223.

version of "men." It is ridiculous to suggest that other Algonquians referred to that tribe as "men." Does anyone believe that the Ottawa, for example, called Lake Michigan the "Lake of the Men," meaning the lake of the so-called Illinois? The French obviously left off the qualifying initial word. The Indians could have as logically called all Europeans "men" because in English they were called English*men,* French*men,* and Dutch*men.*

Because Nicolet went north to Lake Superior, rather than west to Lake Michigan, historians must carefully reassess many of the shaky premises of early seventeenth century historiography. This necessitates a reinterpretation of the tribal wars, fur trade, and exploration of that period.